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ABSTRACT

This paper calls for the standardization of the speech communication basic course at large universities where many sections are taught a semester by graduate students and adjunct faculty. The paper discusses the faculty vision for a standardized basic communication course and suggests that standardization is one of the ways that communication faculty can ensure that speech communication as a discipline can become known for its substantive, integral nature. The paper offers a rationale for standardizing the basic course and discusses what constitutes a standardized course, i.e.: (1) a syllabus designating a minimum number of required chapters from a text/workbook; (2) activities with criteria for grading; (3) tests created by a director or combination of faculty; (4) a teacher-training seminar; (5) feedback from instructors; (6) analyzed statistics regarding attendance and grades; (7) director-analyzed results of instructor and student quantitative and qualitative evaluations; and (8) a central testing center with tests given on approximately the same dates. Arguing that the public must be educated about the discipline, the paper calls for a continued active and high-profile view of communication from its professional organizations. The paper concludes with some predictions and projections. (TB)

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*Issues in Standardizing the Basic Course in Communication: Faculty Visions Versus Administrative Realities Now and in the Future

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The Problem

The debate over the standardization of basic courses in various disciplines is not a new discussion nor is it one that is easily solved (Grey, 1993; L. Shaver, 1993). For many years, from discipline to discipline and within disciplines, educators have dealt with this issue. This paper discusses the rationale for standardization, the faculty vision at one midwestern university, the administrative reality, and projections for the future of the basic course.

In higher education, freshmen and sophomore students often find themselves in what is commonly called "the basic course." For the major in a specific discipline (e.g., communication, sociology, psychology, biology, and so forth), the freshman-level course is generally an introduction to a discipline, designed to give an overview of the various major areas of study.

The basic course in the field of communication was often a introduction to public speaking. In the 1990s, the basic course is often a hybrid or an elementary overview of the field of communication with discussions of fundamental theory and skill-instruction in some of the following: face-to-face public presentations, video presentations, interviews, small group discussion/problem-solving, interpersonal activities, and so

forth. For the non-major, the basic course often satisfies a university or college requirement within the general education core curriculum. On large research campuses, the instructors of the basic course is often a graduate student. At colleges without graduate students, the basic course is often taught by adjunct faculty.

Both the issue of standardization and the most effective design of a standardized basic course have been a source of controversy on many campuses. Various discussions on the basic communication course and the various methods of instruction, content, and structure of the course have been discussed in research and essay reports (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Doucette, 1994; Emanuel & Potter, 1990; Hay, 1992, Hawkins, 1987; Johnson & Szczupakiewicz, 1987).

One of the sacred aspects of higher education pedagogy is the relationship of the subject matter to the course design and to the person who teaches the subject. Controversy over government-mandated topics unrelated to core curriculum in public school classrooms in elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools has been thoroughly debated and documented. Various states have added to the basic public school curriculum many topics, such as patriotism, social values, public health, and local, state, and governmental standards. Some of these same issues and fears have been involved in the debate over standardizing certain courses.

In higher education, the relationship, then, between the instructor and the content has been defended vigorously. Classroom freedom to design a course is vital in matching the teaching styles and standards of the instructor to the course. The instructor, who by membership in a particular department represents the academy, is considered a defender of a critical issue in academic freedom. An instructor's rights and freedoms are indeed important. However, an argument can be made that a standardized basic course can be beneficial to students, whether they are majors in a department or are non-majors who are required to take the basic communication course. Standardization in these situations should not be considered a treat to professorial academic freedoms.

Rationale for Standardizing the Basic Course

Several major arguments for implementing a standardized basic courses are as follows: (1) equitable amount of work for each student, (2) consistency in the content of the course, and (3) quality of teaching over time. These issues arise out of several and differing needs both from inside and outside of any department.

First, the required work in a course should be equitable, regardless of who teaches the course--a full professor, an adjunct, or a graduate assistant. Second, communication departments need to know that when students who plan to major in a particular discipline enroll in the basic course that they will

have a similar introduction to and a shared understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, departments or university core curriculum committees, which require a specific course, need to have the same assurance--that the student will have learned the principles of the subject matter. Third, quality of teaching should be a measurable, controlled, and evaluated resource for the department.

The argument for standardized basic communication courses addresses these three goals. Yet, those who oppose standardized courses often argue that standardization does not guarantee that these objectives will be met. Further, they argue that instructors should not be denied their freedom to design content and structure of a course. Professors in advanced levels courses must indeed have this freedom. Their research and scholarship impact the advanced courses in unique ways that are beneficial to their students. While one may agree that standardization does not guarantee the three goals, one must accept that non-standardization usually guarantees that these objectives are not met. Why should one agree to standardization?

Courses that can be standardized are those that have a foundation of cognitive data with which the student must become familiar. The course should be able to be organized without compromising the basic foundations of the discipline in which it resides. Additionally, the course should be one that is taught regularly, has several sections, and has a higher demand than

regular faculty load can easily accommodate (i.e., a course frequently taught by adjunct faculty or graduate students).

What constitutes a standardized course? The following are some of the characteristics shared by all instructors and students in a standardized course: (1) a syllabus with a minimum number of required chapters from a text/workbook; (3) activities with criteria for grading; (2) tests created by a director or combination of faculty; (3) a central testing center with tests given on approximately the same dates; (4) a teacher-training seminar about the course content and structure; (5) feedback from the instructors; (6) analyzed statistics regarding attendance, and grades, to chart the status, history, and development of the course, and (7) director-analyzed results of instructor and student quantitative and qualitative evaluations (collected on an ongoing and longitudinal basis) and the statistical data from item #6.

If a basic course is taught in a small department without problems of staffing, a standardization of the course is probably not appropriate. However, some circumstances indicate that standardization is an appropriate choice such as the following: (1) if many sections of the course are needed for majors or as a service course taught to many university students from several departments; (2) if professors are burdened with a heavy teaching loads; and (3) if adjuncts and/or graduate students are required to support the large number of sections. If these conditions

exist, then the standardization of a basic course could be a positive change.

When many people teach the same course, whether they be professors, adjuncts, or graduate students, many versions of the course will emerge. If the needs of the students and the university are that the basics of a particular discipline should be taught, does it not follow that a standardization of the course can help provide such a result?

Not all courses, not even all basic courses, are suitable to be standardized. Anyone who has directed or taught a basic speech communication course in a program that uses graduate students or adjuncts is probably aware both of the pitfalls and of the benefits resulting from course standardization. While not a panacea, the standardization of the basic communication course in some settings helps attain the goals of equitable treatment of students, shared content of the course, and quality teaching.

The Faculty Vision for a Standardized Basic Communication Course

When discussions began among the communication faculty at a midwestern regional university regarding standardization of the basic course, the students and faculty, the university as an organization, and the division were placed as categories to be discussed. The faculty regarded student needs as one of the most important areas to be discussed. The following is a summary of the ideas related to the necessary elements for a productive

standardization of the basic course established by the communication faculty:

1. Lectures: Two same-topic lectures (one day and one night course) by a senior faculty person who would, ideally, direct the basic course with copies of lectures or audio/video tapes available for absent students, students who wished to review the material, and adjunct faculty, who would teach the break-out groups.

2. Setting: An auditorium/classroom that would comfortably and effectively (e.g., multi-media ready, appropriate sound system, and so forth) accommodate the students and the lecturer.

3. Structure: Lecture and small break-out sessions with 15 or less students taught by graduate students or, in our case, adjunct faculty.

4. Preparation by break-out instructors: Training for adjunct faculty who teach the break-out groups with all material available prior to the semester.

5. Testing: A central, standard set of tests given at a testing center.

6. Break-out class procedures: Standardized syllabus, activities, assessment sheets, and other handouts.

7. Ongoing evaluation: Meetings that include lecturer/director, communication faculty, and adjuncts throughout the semester; quantified and qualitative evaluations of the

program by instructors, students, and director; statistical data that include student grades, test analyses, and all evaluation results.

8. Implementation of evaluation results: The results of the evaluations would be available to all involved parties by a semester report; faculty, administrators, and adjuncts who, with the director, would be included in implementing changes that are deemed necessary to the course structure and content.

Administrative Realities

The following is a description of the standardized basic course in communication as it is now structured. The differing perspectives of the basic communication course among faculty, divisional administrators, and central administrators resulted in a standardized basic course that has little similarity to the course recommended by the communication faculty.

A historical perspective of the events gives some background to the situation. First, in 1990, the area of communication study was added to a newly formed division of fine arts, music, and theatre as a financial and structural ballast. The required basic communication course that only taught public speaking had a semester enrollment of approximately 600 students (25 students maximum in each class). These classes were primarily taught by adjuncts. Additionally, two or three rhetoric courses were taught during the academic year. The small enrollments in the other subject areas were, in point of fact, supported by the

communication classes. Communication was defined as "public speaking" and rhetoric was perceived as a fine, but hopelessly out-of-date area of study.

Second, in two years (1991 and 1992), the university hired three new communication faculty who did empirical research from a social scientific perspective using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. One new faculty member was to write and to initiate a mass communication Bachelor of Arts curriculum (approved by all parties in May, 1995), and the other two were directed to build the speech communication program, emphasizing rhetoric and public address, political communication, and organizational communication.

Third, certain events resulted in communication faculty anticipating new hires and more resources. The events were the following: the changes in personnel needs with the inclusion of new upper- and lower-division courses, the increase in the number of majors from 18 to 91 in three years, the approval of the mass communication program, and the decline of enrollment in other parts of the division and in other divisions. The communication faculty suggested the changes in the basic communication course for several reasons, including the following: (1) the catalog description of the course included public speaking, group discussion, and interpersonal communication skills; (2) only public speaking had been taught in the course; (3) a fiscal crisis on campus encouraged divisions to make money-saving

changes; (4) the course text was changed; (5) the content of the course needed to include state-of-the-art communication concepts; and (6) the faculty believed that the positive effects of the change would encourage administrative cooperation toward the hiring of new faculty in communication. The changes led to a less than positive result in the standardization of the course.

Fourth, the suggestions of the faculty for an effective presentation of content with suitable structure for a standardized basic course were not implemented. The following paragraph describes the changes that were made by administrative personnel who are not faculty in communication and resulted in the nearly bankrupt status of the course.

The basic communication course is taught in the fall and spring semesters with two instructors teaching approximately six lecture sections each semester (for the approximately 500 students). Adjunct faculty members, who were neither trained nor given instructional support, teach the breakout groups of 20 students per class. No release time was given to the lecturers after the first semester; and no director is working to coordinate the course. No systematic evaluation was done during the first and second semester, and an evaluation program is not in place. The basic course adjunct staff and the lecturer assignment is scheduled by a staff person with increasing problems that accompany an undirected and unevaluated standardized course.

Because the division, in which communication is located, does not have departments, there is no central administrative figure who understands communication as a discipline. Without support staff and without a traditional department chair, individual faculty are prevented from managing the standardized course and are in the awkward position of trying to battle the resulting crises as they occur. The administrative realities were driven by administrative perceptions of curriculum in communication; assumptions about structure and content of the basic course (and the field of communication); input from other areas of study and their competing resource needs; and the managerial styles of the administrative personnel. This is not an unusual situation in universities, but the chronology of events and the status quo has led to a less than satisfactory standardized basic course.

Projections and Predictions for the Basic Communication Course

As a discipline, communication continues to be mislabeled in particular regions as a "performance art," a "frill" major, or an unknown in ever increasing fields that study human interaction. The lack of consistency in naming departments (e.g., speech communication, speech, communication arts, communication studies, and so forth) has resulted in a less than universal recognition of communication among our peers, in other universities, at city, state, and federal government agencies, with various testing

bureaus (e.g., SAT, ACT, and so forth), and other organizations.

On our campus, the communication faculty has attempted on request "to educate" both administrative and faculty personnel about our discipline. However, some still "do not get it." Leaders in our area of communication have called for a more public profile through local media organizations. The Speech Communication Association is actively participating in Goals 2000. Communication is a buzz word on the lips of business people and professionals in many fields. Therefore, as the front line warriors of communication, the instructors and directors of the basic communication course have an opportunity to make a difference for our discipline. The basic course can be effectively and professionally planned in content, structure, and execution. When ongoing analyses of evaluations in all areas of the course are used to monitor the course and its direction, the basic communication course becomes a recruiting tool and a source of life-skills for students.

This paper calls for a continued active and high-profile view of communication from its professional organizations. Professors in communication at all universities can be involved in the education of the public about communication at the local level. Nation-wide information about communication and its contribution to knowledge about human communication needs to be a priority for our professional organizations.

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